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ABSTRACT

Teachers' dismissal of Robert Cormier's books as "too depressing" suggests a lack of sound critical understanding of his work and a lack of faith in individual young people. The body of adolescent or young adult literature has come a long way in recent years. The writing has shown a much fuller range of literary quality and the content or subject matter has been expanding. Cormier's works are consistent, in that they focus on the struggle between individuals and an institution. Cormier causes the reader to see through the individual characters that the boundaries and the controls set by the institution need not and must not be passively accepted. Not one of his characters is concerned with alcoholism, drug use (except where imposed by institutions), premarital sex, childbirth, physical handicaps, social and racial problems, divorce, menstruation, or other topics common to adolescent literature. His heroes are tragic and their flaw is their unwillingness to "play by established rules." Like the authors of many adult novels, Cormier is a writer of hope who may heighten the awareness of those who are subject to the forces he depicts and inspire his readers with ennobling portrayals of human beings as individuals. (HTH)

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CORMIER AND THE PESSIMISTIC VIEW

W. Geiger Ellis, University of Georgia
at National Council of Teachers of English Spring Conference
Houston, Texas, March 29, 1985

This title seems to be a natural one for the subject. All one has to do is to read a Cormier novel or two and talk to some English teachers who have done the same. In every group of experienced English teachers that I have worked with, there has been a reaction from one or more teachers relating either a first- or a second-hand experience which goes something like this:

"Oh yes, Cormier really writes well, but I couldn't use The Chocolate War (or substitute another Cormier title) with my students. It is just too depressing. There would be some parents who would complain about his dark view of life. I really don't think it is good for kids to concentrate on such a negative portrayal of humanity."

I regard such reactions with more than a little suspicion that the holders of this view lack a sound critical understanding of Cormier's work, and they lack faith in individual young people. This second shortcoming becomes ironic when the first fault is overcome.

The subject, Cormier and the pessimistic view, might be interpreted as an announcement that what follows will be a

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forthright analysis of Cormier's pessimism as revealed by close textual analysis of his works. I prefer to interpret the title as something more like: The man and the movement, which I feel is best approached in reverse order. For that reason, I will follow this approach:

First, I plan to set the background and the context for Cormier's work.

Second, I will comment on his work itself.

Third, I will explore the relationship between Cormier's work and its literary context, which finally will lead me to a concluding statement on the topic, Cormier and the Pessimistic View.

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That body of literature variously known as young adult literature, literature for adolescents, and adolescent literature has come a long way in recent years. Up through the 1950's and into the 60's, most books so identified were didactic and formulaic, presenting characters who were static (except the teen-aged protagonist could be counted on by the book's end to make an abrupt change toward what was accepted as adult behavior) and moved through predictable plots and reasonably safe settings.

Then came the social revolution often simply referred to as "the 60's," with its call for something called "relevance" and its focus on various social ills. As the resultant changes in values and behavior worked their way through society, the field of adolescent literature underwent corresponding changes in both quality and content. To some extent these changes were related to the publishing explosion of books for adolescents.

Range of Quality

For one thing, the writing has shown a much fuller range of literary quality. Notice that I do not simply say that the writing is better these days, for we have plenty of pot-boilers, cheap commercial efforts to exploit an identifiable market, and some outright trash, masquerading as "realism."

Some disappointments are bound to accompany success. Just as some newly acclaimed athletes do not carry their fame and fortune well, so some well-known authors for adolescents prostitute their talents. Norma Klein's Beginners' Love should appear near the top (or bottom) of any list of sleazy books. Writers of far less talent generally produce these episodic collections of sexual encounters. The characters parade from oberving others copulate in public to sharing masturbation, oral, and straight sex. All is

portrayed with the commonest terminology and without the least pretense of art.

What I am noting here about the current state of adolescent literature is that with increased productivity in the field, there has been an attendant increase in the number of books on each of several levels of literary merit. The most encouraging aspect of that increase, of course, is the greater number of fine books. Ken Donelson noted this trend in an article in Media & Methods when he wrote, "The 70's more than fulfilled our hopes for mature, well-written adolescent literature; in the midst of the inevitable gunk..."

Content

While the range of literary quality has been filling out, so too has the content or subject matter been expanding. Books that bear the YA label are not so easily defined as once was so, for these books (or their authors) have pushed beyond the narrow social restrictions once imposed on life and literature, especially for young people.

These books embrace all of life and the imagination. In short, they are more like adult books, which also have undergone some changes themselves over the years. This shift was characterized by Lois Duncan when she told of writing her first

novel which included a scene in which a boy of 19 drank a beer. She said:

"The publisher I submitted it to returned it promptly, saying 'This is unmarketable. School librarians would never purchase a book in which a young person imbibed alcohol.' I changed the beer to a Coke and resubmitted the manuscript. Not only was it accepted for publication, but it went into paperback, was serialized in a magazine, and received a national award. My career was launched, and I had learned a dramatic lesson in the process: To achieve success in life you play by the established rules."

In another instance she recalled, "A story was returned for revision because the lead character missed church one Sunday (She was being chased by a killer at the time). I hauled her out of that scene for an hour and stuck her in a pew at First Congregational. All good intentions were rewarded. Once right was done, everybody lived happily ever after with no loose ends left hanging...That was the world I grew up in. It is not the world of today...There was a lovely simplicity about those days when everything was drawn with clear lines, when things fell into neat compartments--right and wrong--good and bad--acceptable and unacceptable. I liked the security of knowing without doubt such

truths as "a virgin bride is man's natural choice" and "drugs are used only by derilicts" and "if an adult tells you something, it has to be right." In a way, too, it was nice to be told what subjects I could write about and how I was to approach them. It made writing easy. It saved me from having to make decisions...

"Today those rules are gone...There are books about alcoholism, drug use, premarital sex, childbirth, physical handicaps, social and racial problems, divorce, mental illness, and homosexuality. Judy Blume's eleven-year-old menstruates. Richard Peck's seventeen-year-old gets raped. Fran Arrick's fourteen-year-old becomes a prostitute. The doors of life have been thrown wide, and the writer of youth books today has an entire world...to draw upon and to utilize...It's exciting, challenging, and more than a little frightening."

A few moments ago in mentioning the range of literary quality, I said that there were plenty of pot-boilers and some outright trash masquerading as "realism"--a part of the same realistic movement noted by Lois Duncan. This new realism, usually dated from the publication of Sue Hinton's The Outsiders, was born--indeed, unleashed beginning in the mid-60's and continuing through the 70's. The effect of this realism was to give readers and critics comfort in knowing how "relevant" the

books were to the lives of their readers. This, of course, was the time when the yardstick of "relevance" was deemed paramount.

This so-called realism reminds me of the disservice done American Indians and history itself by many writers of the past who romanticized their subjects. Just as it is possible to err in the direction of glorification, it is possible to err in the opposite direction. It is just as much a disservice to adolescents to sensationalize and generalize negative elements in their lives as it was to romanticize in past years. The companion term for such mishandling of life in art might be Re' - a - lis'- ti - ci - zing.

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This, then, was the world of adolescent literature in 1974 when Jerry Renault dared to disturb the universe of Brother Leon, Archie, and the others in The Chocolate War. Three years later in I Am the Cheese Adam was struggling for psychological survival in a world seemingly controlled by Mr. Grey. In 1979 Kate Forester of After the First Death reached for new strengths, not only for her own survival but for that of the children for whom she felt responsible. Now in the 10th year after The Chocolate War, Barney Snow and his friends in The Bumblebee Flies Anyway are taking

their places beside Cormier's earlier characters in the fight to gain individual control of individual destinies.

In Bumblebee, he has done it again. Cormier is Cormier. This novel is consistent with his other successes by focusing on the struggle between individuals and an institution. Institutions are dehumanizing, but humans do not succumb easily--or necessarily. While the larger theme is unchanged, he has forced us to think in yet another arena, for the battle we see in Bumblebee involves the medical establishment. Yet it would be a disservice to suggest that this novel is an expose of the world of medicos; like its predecessors, it explores the boundaries of human spirit together with the possibilities within these boundaries.

In saying these things about this novel, I am, of course, commenting on the earlier three novels as well. Consistently, the central theme has been the struggle between individuals and institutions. In The Chocolate War the institution is a combination of church and the educational establishment; in I Am the Cheese it is a combination of national government and a psycho-medical institution; in After the First Death it is a military/political combination; and The Bumblebee Flies Anyway

presents the medical establishment as it dabbles with individuals chemically and psychologically.

In each instance the institution holds overall control of the arena within which the characters move. It sets the boundaries, both physical and psychological, and most of the people are behaving in acceptable patterns--acceptable to the institutions because the patterns do not disturb the universe. But Cormier, again in each instance, focuses our attention on individuals. In doing so, he causes us to see through these individuals that the boundaries and the controls need not be passively accepted. They can be challenged; indeed, they must be challenged.

Jerry clearly bucks the system by making decisions for himself so that he can gain control of his life. Adam is constantly trying to gain such control. In his mind he is courageously travelling beyond the constraining boundaries of his institution, and in reality he is fighting to grasp the reality that he glimpses. Kate relentlessly schemes against her captors and takes actions whenever possible. Barney Snow undertakes a surreptitious project that carries him across the imposed boundaries.

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So here we have these characters, this body of work, set in the existing milieu of adolescent literature in which realisticizing is the dominant mode. Not one of Cormier's characters is concerned with "alcoholism, drug use (except where imposed by institutions), premarital sex, childbirth, physical handicaps, social and racial problems, divorce, mental illness (except where imposed by institutions), or homosexuality." His focus has not been on menstruation, rape, or prostitution.

Cormier's characters stepped boldly and independently into the world of adolescent literature where most characters finally got their first bra, or reached a decision about having intercourse, or chose to have an abortion or a baby, or kicked a drug habit, or adjusted to a single-parent home. While surely Jerry, Adam, Kate, and Barney must somewhere in their lives have had to confront similar concerns, it took the good sense of their creator to have a larger view to see much greater problems that young people should face.

Cormier clearly has been out of step with the mainstream of adolescent literature, as out of step as his protagonists are with their envioronments. It is by hearing a different drummer that a person may become an individual. While his novels definitely put me in mind of The Ox-Bow Incident, which I will mention again in a

moment, an assessment of Walter Van Tilburg Clark, that novel's author, by Walter Prescott Webb seems to fit Robert Cormier, as well:

Webb wrote about Clark: He is not consciously trying to be either heroic or profound, but rather to see how much he can understand in order that he may make others understand what he sees. His refusal to pander, to join the parade of popular ... writers, is something for which he probably deserves little credit. He is bound by his own limitations, one of which seems to be a built-in integrity that forbids him to do what he does not himself respect. Considering his background, one could say that he must have a New England conscience standing guard over his impulses. To such a man fame and fortune come as incidentals, not as a result of a calculated chase." (The Ox-Bow Incident The New American Library, 1960, p. 220.)

While different in important ways from his contemporaries, in one respect, a most important one, Robert Cormier is a part of the movement of adolescent literature, for he not only contributes to the expanding number of fine books but he is a leader in their creation. As Alleen Nilsen has written, "Cormier is one of a relatively small number of contemporary authors for young readers who makes use of the full range of techniques available to skilled

literary artists." Cormier was an unquestioned part of Ken Donelson's listing in Media & Methods of outstanding books from recent years. His books explore the boundaries of literary expression for his audience rather than safely following the pack.

His approach sharply differs from that expressed by Lois Duncan. Remember her words: "My career was launched, and I had learned a dramatic lesson in the process: To achieve success in life you play by the established rules." Perhaps Ms. Duncan is right if success is described in limited terms, but the scope of an individual's success depends upon the scope of that person's perception. There is a difference between confronting the inevitable difficulties of maturation and confronting the larger issues of humanity.

One of the major issues confronting humanity today is the survival of freedom and individual human rights. While super-patriots are busy enhancing their political standing by rattling sabres, shouting "the Russians are coming," and wrapping themselves in our flag, a real threat is gnawing at our innards. It is as Pogo said, "The enemy is met, and it is us." (Walt Kelly)

Walter Van Tilburg Clark, speaking of his novel The Ox-Bow Incident, said: "...it was a kind of American Naziism that I was talking about. I had the parallel in mind, all right, but what I

was most afraid of was not the German Nazis, ... but that ever-present element in any society which can always be led to act the same way, to use authoritarian methods to oppose authoritarian methods.

"What I wanted to say was, 'It can happen here. It has happened here, in minor but sufficiently indicative ways, a great many times.' " (The Ox-Bow Incident, The New American Library, 1960, p.]224.)

Such an insinuating evil was amply noted by Dwight Eisenhower when he warned Americans of the "growing military-industrial complex." That instituitional threat to freedom is but one part of the ubiquitous threat posed by the variety of establishments which permeate and control our lives, ever subduing rather than preserving individual freedom. As Clark sent a warning to his readers forty years earlier, so Cormier sounds an alarm today. He has given us carefully-crafted, inspiring novels that give readers a feel for the struggle between these two forces, the individual and dehumanizing institutions, which are ostensibly good but have an insidious nature. School, church, hospital, government--surely these are people-serving, individual-enhancing institutions. Look more closely, as Cormier guides us, for unsettling views are waiting.

Such a negative portrayal of established institutions is bound to be unpopular in some circles and will make some individuals uncomfortable, especially when they themselves are a part of and subject to such an institution. Specifically, many teachers feel that they dare not disturb the universe, and as Cormier has made perfectly clear, there is danger in doing so.

It is no more difficult to understand why a teacher would choose not to assign a Cormier novel to a class than it is to understand why Jerry Renault would choose to go along with the crowd. As Lois Duncan pointed out, "To achieve success in life you play by the established rules." Make no mistake about it, "established rules" means the rules of the established institutions. But the question remains for the thoughtful individual: What kind of success do I want? And that is certainly a worthy question for young people to consider.

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So what has all this to say about Cormier and the pessimistic view? It may be pointed out that the evil is not conquered in his novels. His heroes are more tragic than not. It may be suggested that their flaw is an unwillingness to "play by the established rules." They share this trait with Phineas in A Separate Peace, who was too pure, too individualistic to survive, rather than

being like Gene who learned how to survive. I can say only that had Cormier's protagonists annihilated their institutional adversaries, those novels would have been absurd.

The fact is that the evil has not been overcome. It is still with us and must be fought with all the wits and courage that individuals can summon, just as happens in the novels. Rather than saying that the struggle is hopeless, it might be better to say that it is formidable. Besides, adolescents have an innate sense of immortality. No one is better suited for recognizing and taking up the challenge.

Lest you think me foolhardy, let me remind you of the accomplishments of an individual--Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. If ever an individual faced overwhelming odds, Dr. King did in those early years of the 1950's. He did not always have the hundreds of thousands behind him, but still he recognized a just cause and was its champion. Yes, he was shot down, but his dream and his accomplishments live.

Another Nobel Prize winner, the Hindu poet Tagore said, "We do not raise our hands to the void for things beyond hope." In the works of Robert Cormier, I see a writer of hope, not despair.

Is Robert Cormier a pessimist? Hardly so. Nearly fifty years ago, Bernard DeVoto said of Mark Twain, "Pessimism is only

the name that men of weak nerves give to wisdom." ("Mark Twain: The Ink of History. Address, University of Missouri, December, 1935.)

Cormier is a writer of hope who may heighten the awareness of those who are subject to the forces he depicts and inspire his readers with ennobling portrayal of human beings as individuals.